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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 002337

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SUBJECT: PROGRESS ON ELECTIONS BUT QUESTIONS PERSIST

REF: ABUJA 2198 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell for reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) Summary: A recent series of high-profile events and appearances, including a national elections forum organized by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), testimony by INEC's chairman before the full Senate and a well-received speech by President Obasanjo have helped focus discussion on the political and technical challenges in organizing credible elections in 2007. Collectively, these events have helped dampen, even if only temporarily, rising political tensions resulting from criticism about the lack of visible progress in preparing for elections that are only seven months away.

PRESIDENT OBASANJO ADDRESSES INEC ELECTION FORUM

¶2. (U) INEC's three-day conference entitled, "Nigeria's 2007 General Elections: Critical Challenges Ahead" brought together hundreds of delegates to discuss electoral preparation, curbing violence, the role of the media, money and elections, and INEC's timetable for elections. The high-profile event was co-sponsored by the European Union, UNDP, DFID, and CIDA, and its proceedings, and the subsequent debate, dominated Nigerian news during the final week of August 2006.

¶3. (U) Two appearances shaped the INEC forum. The first was a well-received speech by President Obasanjo in which he declared he would step down and return to his farm on May 29, 2007. President Obasanjo also addressed rumors about the possibility of an interim government by saying "Those talking about Interim National Government are either ignorant of the constitution or they are evil-minded or mischief makers because there is not room anywhere for such a contraption except during the state of war against other countries." President Obasanjo was flanked on the dais by former presidents Shagari, Buhari, and Vice President Atiku, providing important symbolism.

¶4. (U) The second important announcement was made by the chairman of INEC, Maurice Iwu, who has been under pressure because of mounting impatience with a lack of visible progress in preparing for elections, including the failed voter's registration exercise in Abuja. Looking to stem the tide of criticism about lack of progress, Iwu announced the dates for next year's elections (April 21 for presidential and national assembly and April 14 for state and local elections) ending months of speculation. He also said voter's registration would begin October 7 and that three vendors had been chosen to supply 33,000 electronic machines for the voter's registration exercise.

Iwu Testifies Before the Senate

¶15. (U) Iwu followed this announcement with an appearance before the Senate where he answered pointed questions about INEC's credibility and preparations. He reiterated that INEC was confident that it would complete the registration exercise at least 120 days before the polls, despite the added complications of biometric data capture for the anticipated 65 million voters who must re-register. He also said February 6, 2007 is the last day for the submission or substitution of political parties, candidates which INEC promised to publish for all parties on March 24, 2007, which the Electoral Law says must be done at least 14 days before the election.

¶16. (U) Iwu also addressed the issue of the role of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) in screening candidates. EFCC Chairman Ribadu was quoted in the media as saying that his agency would disqualify any corrupt politician from contesting the forthcoming elections. There was fear that the EFCC might be used by President Obasanjo to disqualify his political opponents from contesting. Iwu, however, stated that political parties are the ones allowed by Nigerian law to screen candidates not the EFCC, or even INEC. "It is the parties that will submit candidates to us and they themselves must have screened the candidates," he said in his testimony.

¶17. (U) Iwu also said the electoral body had no financial problems. He testified that out of the 60 billion Naira budgeted for the 2006 elections in the current fiscal year, 42 billion Naira had been released. As stipulated by law,

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political parties had received an initial tranche of money to conduct their activities and this seems to have moderated the tone and content of their attacks against INEC.

ELECTION PARTNERS MEETING

¶18. (U) Many of these findings, especially the respite that last week's flurry of activities brought to the pre-electoral environment were confirmed during a briefing by the US Democracy partners (IRI, NDI, IFES) for the Ambassador and DAS Linda Thomas-Greenfield on August 31. With dates announced for the elections and registration, the IFES director said he believed that INEC was still capable of meeting its legal deadlines for registration and the conduct of the elections, although with little room for error.

¶19. (U) The IFES director, however, expressed concern that the 33,000 biometric-capable registration machines were being purchased from three different vendors. He was also concerned about the potential for technical confusion. The limited supply of machines would require INEC to rotate the machines around the country in order to register the estimated 65 million voters in two months a task that must be done from scratch. None of the machines are in country, he said, and it is unclear when they would actually be available, first for training, and then for actual registration. In addition, 120,000 machines (one for each polling place) would be needed for validating registered voter's on election day.

COMMENT

¶10. (U) Comment: Last week's appearances by President Obasanjo and INEC chairman Iwu acted as a safety valve, releasing pressure from a system which was showing signs of overheating because of a lack of confidence, violence and uncertainty. Despite Obasanjo's statement, his behavior,

especially within the PDP, is not that of a person who anticipates leaving office, and he has not signalled support for any specific candidate. However, with significant political and technical obstacles still visible on the road to credible elections in 2007, the goodwill engendered by last week announcements provide a glimmer of good news in an otherwise contentious pre-electoral environment.

CAMPBELL